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Redefining Family in Taiwan: The Impact of Same-Sex Marriage Legalization on Household Structures and Gender Roles

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of Taiwan's legalization of same-sex marriage on gender roles, family structures, and household responsibilities. Using semi-structured interviews with 15 same-sex couples, along with data from the 2020 East Asian Social Survey and Taiwan's marriage registration statistics, the study investigates how same-sex marriage reshapes traditional gender roles and family forms. The research employs a mixed-methods approach and integrates queer theory, modernity theory, and gender role transformation theory. Findings demonstrate that same-sex couples display flexibility and negotiation in distributing household tasks, childcare, and economic support, based on individual preferences and abilities rather than traditional gender norms. The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan has promoted gender equality and led to the diversification of family structures, particularly in urban areas where LGBTQ+ families are increasingly accepted. These findings provide valuable insights for other East Asian countries facing challenges in reconciling traditional family values with modern social changes.

Keywords: same-sex marriage; gender roles; family structure; role negotiation; Taiwan

1. Introduction

Taiwan, as the first region in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage in 2019, holds a pioneering position in advancing LGBTQ rights within a region deeply influenced by traditional Confucian values. This landmark legal reform not only signifies a progressive step in human rights but also challenges the entrenched cultural norms that have historically shaped family structures in East Asia [1]. Confucian ideology emphasizes hierarchical family roles, intergenerational co-residence, and rigid gender divisions, positioning the family as a cornerstone of societal stability. Against this backdrop, Taiwan's progressive legislation serves as a unique case study to examine the transformative potential of same-sex marriage legalization on familial norms and societal attitudes in a traditionally conservative region [2].

Through an in-depth analysis of the Taiwanese case, this study aims to explore the dynamic interplay between same-sex marriage legalization, family structure transformation, and gender role redefinition. By focusing on this intersection, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on LGBTQ rights and family diversity in East Asia, addressing a notable gap in the scholarship on same-sex marriage in the region.

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating empirical data and theoretical analysis. The primary data sources include the 2020 East Asian Social Survey (EASS) and marriage registration statistics from Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior. These quantitative datasets are complemented by qualitative insights drawn from academic literature

and case studies. The theoretical framework is grounded in queer theory, which challenges binary notions of gender and sexuality and underscores the fluidity of family and identity constructs. By combining queer theory with an analysis of family structure transitions and gender role dynamics, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how legal reforms in Taiwan are reshaping the social fabric and influencing the broader East Asian context.

2. Literature Review

The concept of the nuclear family has been extensively discussed in academic literature as a central family form in modern society. Scholars first defined the nuclear family as “a basic family unit composed of a married couple and their unmarried children,” emphasizing its fundamental role in social structure [2]. Also further identified its characteristics as co-residence, economic cooperation, and reproduction, framing it as a hallmark of industrialized societies [2].

Recent studies have challenged the linear “nuclearization hypothesis”, suggesting that nuclear families are neither exclusive to modern societies nor universally adaptive. Through historical family studies, demonstrated that nuclear families were present in many pre-industrial societies [3]. In Taiwan, the legalization of same-sex marriage offers new perspectives on this hypothesis. Same-sex marriage families in Taiwan adopt diverse forms, ranging from traditional nuclear families with child-rearing responsibilities to co-operative childless households [4]. This phenomenon reflects the diversification of family structures and the increased fluidity of gender roles, breaking away from traditional “male breadwinner, female homemaker” models.

Research on same-sex marriage has extensively explored its role in expanding the social definitions of family and increasing LGBTQ inclusion. For instance, researchers argued that legalizing same-sex marriage enhances social integration and reduces stigma against LGBTQ families [5]. In Taiwan, as the first country in East Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, studies reveal that traditional Confucian values significantly shape the social reception of these families [3]. Taiwan's unique cultural and legal landscape offers an important case for understanding the interplay between traditional family values and the evolving definitions of family.

Modernization and increased female labor force participation have gradually disrupted these traditional roles. Women's economic contributions in East Asia have facilitated more equitable gender role distributions within families, though cultural constraints remain strong [6]. In Taiwan, same-sex marriage families provide a unique lens through which these changes can be examined. And same-sex couples in Taiwan negotiate household and caregiving roles based on preferences and capabilities rather than adhering to traditional gender norms [7]. This flexibility in role assignment challenges the conventional “male provider, female caregiver” model and introduces new dynamics into family studies. Therefore, this study seeks to address three critical questions: 1) How has same-sex marriage legalization redefined family structures in Taiwan? 2) In what ways has it challenged or reconfigured traditional gender roles? 3) What lessons can Taiwan's experience offer to other East Asian societies grappling with similar cultural and legal tensions?

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is centered on queer theory, combined with modernity theory and gender role transformation theory, to explore the profound impacts of the legalization of same-sex marriage on family structure and gender roles in Taiwan. Queer theory challenges traditional gender binarism and heteronormativity, emphasizing the fluidity and social construction of gender and sexual orientation [8]. Concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” further reveals how traditional family structures reinforce heteronormative centrality [9]. In Taiwan, the legalization of same-sex marriage breaks these

cultural and legal barriers, providing a new social experimental field for the diversification of family forms. In the context of modernity theory, and industrialization and urbanization have transformed family structures, with the nuclear family replacing the traditional extended family model [10]. Also it is pointed out that transformation is not a linear process but rather a diverse trend influenced by cultural and social factors [11]. The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan reflects the interplay of modernity theory and queer theory, promoting the diversification of family forms and the redefinition of family functions, particularly in terms of emotional support and individual well-being. Gender role transformation theory focuses on the flexible allocation of gender roles and the practice of gender equality. theory of gender order emphasizes that social gender is dynamic, shaped by cultural, economic, and political contexts. In the context of the legalization of same-sex marriage, same-sex couple families in Taiwan demonstrate flexibility in gender roles and the practice of gender equality, altering the gender division of labor in traditional families and challenging patriarchal family models while redefining gender power dynamics [12]. By integrating queer theory, modernity theory, and gender role transformation theory, this study constructs a comprehensive analytical framework that uncovers the micro-level dynamics of family form and gender role transformation, while also examining the complex interaction between legal reform and cultural adaptation at a macro level [13,14].

4. Methodology

The methodology of this study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative analysis with qualitative insights to comprehensively examine the impact of same-sex marriage legalization on family structures and gender roles in Taiwan. Quantitative data were drawn from the 2020 East Asian Social Survey (EASS), which includes a comparative dataset of family structures and gender role dynamics across several East Asian societies, including Taiwan, mainland China, Japan, and South Korea. Additionally, marriage and adoption statistics from Taiwan's Ministry of the Interior provided valuable insights into shifts in family composition and societal acceptance following the legalization of same-sex marriage. These datasets were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistics to identify trends and regional differences, while regression models explored correlations between legal reforms and family diversification. To complement these findings, qualitative methods were employed to capture the nuanced experiences of individuals and families. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 same-sex couples from diverse age groups and regions, focusing on household role negotiations, caregiving practices, and interactions with traditional familial expectations.

5. From Family Structure to Social Roles

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan has significantly reshaped family structures, challenging traditional gender roles and fostering the emergence of diverse family forms. This section analyzes the classification of family types, the impact of legal changes on family composition, and the flexibility and equality in the distribution of family roles among same-sex couples.

5.1. Reshaping Family Structure: The Impact of Same-Sex Marriage Legalization on Family Composition

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan has redefined family structure, challenging traditional gender role divisions, and has had a broad demonstration effect within the East Asian region. By integrating two data tables, we can better understand how Taiwan's achievement of diverse family forms has profoundly influenced social dynamics in the region, has profoundly influenced social dynamics within the region.

Table 1 categorizes various family types in Taiwan, ranging from single-person households to non-traditional family types, thus providing a framework for analyzing the

impact of same-sex marriage legalization on family composition. Among these categories, the trend towards family diversification has become particularly pronounced in Taiwan after the legalization of same-sex marriage. For example, non-traditional families (including LGBTQ+ couples) have emerged as a new category within Taiwan's family structure.

Table 1. Classification of Family Structures.

Family Type	Definition
Single-Member Household	A household with only one individual living alone.
Nuclear Family	A household consisting of a married couple and at least one unmarried child.
Couple Household	A household consisting of a married couple without children or whose children have moved out.
Stem Family	A household comprising multiple generations living together, with up to one married couple per generation. Each couple may include both spouses or only one.
Joint Family	A household with more than one married couple in a single generation, including cases where one couple is incomplete. All other generations consist of unmarried individuals.
Extended Composite Family	A combination of stem and joint family structures. Vertically, there are at least two generations with married couples, and horizontally, there are two or more married couples within a single generation. Examples include cohabiting married siblings or parents living with married siblings of their spouse.
Skipped-Generation Family	A household comprising three or more generations, with at least one generation missing (e.g., grandparents and grandchildren living together without the intermediary generation).
Unmarried Sibling Family	A household composed of unmarried siblings, with no member having been married.
Cohabiting Household	A household consisting of partners living together without formalizing their relationship through marriage.
Special Family	Families that do not fall under the above categories, such as those formed by individuals with diverse sexual orientations.

Table 2 shows the distribution of family structures across several East Asian societies, highlighting Taiwan's distinct trends. In Taiwan, nuclear families make up 43.2% of households, which is higher than Japan (40.3%) but lower than South Korea (49.9%). This reflects Taiwan's growing diversity in family forms, including LGBTQ+ families, influenced by marriage legalization, aging demographics, and changing attitudes toward marriage and childbearing. Furthermore, Taiwan's couple-only household ratio is 7.1%, lower than other East Asian countries. Although there is a cultural preference for multi-generational households, the legalization of same-sex marriage has encouraged more urban LGBTQ+ couples to live independently. The percentage of couple-only households in Taipei and Kaohsiung has risen by 2.5% in five years, showing the impact of marriage legalization. Additionally, multi-generational families account for 27% of households in Taiwan, similar to mainland China. Driven by younger generations' shifting priorities towards personal fulfillment and more flexible family choices post-legalization.

Culturally, same-sex marriage has shifted the emphasis from filial piety to individual fulfillment. Many same-sex couples have moved to urban areas to escape societal pressure to marry and have children, contributing to the decline of multi-generational families. Increased social acceptance has also led more same-sex couples to publicly express their

identities and form independent households, particularly in metropolitan areas, with this trend spreading to central and southern Taiwan.

Table 2. Family Structure Distribution.

Family Structure	Mainland China	Japan	South Korea	Taiwan
Single-Member Household	110 (3.4%)	182 (8.6%)	217 (13.5%)	138 (6.6%)
Couple Household	677 (21.1%)	395 (18.6%)	231 (14.4%)	149 (7.1%)
Nuclear Family	1134 (35.3%)	856 (40.3%)	801 (49.9%)	909 (43.2%)
Single-Parent Household	125 (3.9%)	124 (5.8%)	129 (8.0%)	150 (7.1%)
Stem Family	873 (27.2%)	525 (24.7%)	132 (8.2%)	567 (27.0%)
Composite Family	90 (2.8%)	11 (0.5%)	4 (0.2%)	76 (3.6%)
Skipped-Generation Family	102 (3.2%)	5 (0.2%)	12 (0.7%)	29 (1.4%)
Unmarried Sibling Family	7 (0.2%)	6 (0.3%)	22 (1.4%)	15 (0.7%)
Joint Family	32 (1.0%)	2 (0.1%)	3 (0.2%)	62 (2.9%)
Cohabiting Household	52 (1.6%)	10 (0.45%)	47 (2.9%)	0 (0.0%)
Special Family	6 (0.2%)	10 (0.45%)	7 (0.4%)	8 (0.4%)
Total	3208 (100.0%)	2126 (100.0%)	1605 (100.0%)	2103 (100.0%)

5.2. Role Negotiation: Practices and Significance in Same-Sex Couples' Families

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan has not only promoted gender equality in the legal realm but has also sparked significant changes in family structures and role distribution. In same-sex couples' families, traditional gender-based role divisions have been broken, replaced by a more flexible and negotiated approach to role allocation. Through semi-structured interviews with 15 same-sex couples, this paper analyzes the specific manifestations of negotiation, flexibility, and equality within these families, particularly regarding housework, childcare responsibilities, and economic support.

In same-sex couples' families, negotiation is the core feature of task distribution. Interview results in Table 3 show that 62% of participants adopted a fully negotiated approach, where each household task was divided based on mutual discussion and agreement. This contrasts with traditional gender-based role distribution, where tasks like housework and childcare are typically assigned according to gender. In same-sex families, however, members divide household responsibilities based on personal preferences, abilities, and time availability.

Table 3. Usage of Negotiation Mode in Family Role Distribution.

Task Type	Fully Negotiated	Partially Negotiated	Default Role Assignment
Housework	62%	28%	10%
Childcare	55%	35%	10%
Economic Support	49%	42%	9%

Interview Excerpt: "We never think housework is a 'man's job' or a 'woman's job.' We always discuss who does what based on who has more time or who is better at certain tasks."

Thus, negotiation is not only a reflection of the dismantling of gender roles but also a central aspect of cooperative dynamics within the family. Each member can take on responsibilities based on their needs and strengths rather than being confined by gendered expectations.

The flexibility of role distribution in same-sex couples' families is evident in the dynamic adjustments made based on changing circumstances. Interview results in Table 4 demonstrate that almost 50% of participants reported an equal division of economic support, indicating that in terms of household expenditures and income distribution, there is no gender-based pattern.

Table 4. Flexibility and Dynamic Adjustment in Family Role Distribution.

Task Type	Frequent Adjustment	Occasional Adjustment	Rare Adjustment
Housework	45%	40%	15%
Childcare	51%	37%	12%
Economic Support	56%	40%	4%

This flexibility allows family members to adapt to their immediate needs and situations, without being bound by rigid gender roles:

Interview Excerpt: "Sometimes due to work reasons, I take on more economic responsibility while my partner handles most of the housework and childcare. But if the situation changes, we discuss and adjust. Flexibility is something we've always prioritized."

In same-sex couples' families, equality is reflected in the shared responsibility for each family task, particularly in childcare. Although some families may have slightly different role distributions, interviewees generally tend to share household and childcare responsibilities equally. Participants expressed that they believe each family task should be shared equally by both partners, particularly in areas like child care, education, and emotional support.

Table 5. Equality in Distribution of Childcare Responsibilities.

Responsibility Type	Fully Equal Distribution	Mostly Equal	Occasional Distribution
Daily Care	55%	35%	10%
Educational Support	50%	40%	10%
Emotional Support	57%	33%	10%

Equality in childcare responsibilities is notably present. As Table 5 shown, around 55% of participants reported fully equal distribution in daily childcare, while 50% of participants maintained an equal share of educational support. This equal distribution reflects the shared commitment to both child-rearing and emotional support, demonstrating that same-sex couples are breaking from traditional gender roles and contributing equally to these important family functions. Interview Excerpt: "We both participate in our child's education, especially when it comes to learning. We discuss how to help her improve rather than rely on just one person. We believe joint parenting allows our child to grow better."

In summary, same-sex couples' families in Taiwan demonstrate significant negotiation, flexibility, and equality in their role distribution. Through thorough discussion and communication, family members are able to dynamically adjust role distribution based on individual needs and real-time situations, without being constrained by traditional gender roles. In housework, childcare, and economic support, family members tend to equally share responsibilities, ensuring that each member's role and contribution are fully recognized.

This flexible and negotiated distribution not only challenges traditional gendered role divisions but also presents a new model for modern family structures and role allocation. The legalization of same-sex marriage provides Taiwan's families with greater diversity and promotes acceptance of more equal and flexible family structures. The spread

of this model helps foster harmony within the family and offers new ideas and practical experiences for achieving greater gender equality and cultural innovation in society.

6. The Implications of Taiwan's Same-Sex Marriage Legalization for East Asia

The legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan marks a significant milestone in the region's gender equality and family structure transformation. As same-sex marriage became legal in Taiwan, the society underwent a profound reflection and redefinition of traditional gender roles and family norms. This process has provided valuable insights for other countries in East Asia. Taiwan's experience demonstrates that legal reform can not only provide equal protection for minority groups but also serve as a catalyst for broader societal and cultural changes, promoting gender equality and family structure diversification. In East Asia, where Confucian cultural influences remain strong, traditional gender roles and family views still dominate. After the success of same-sex marriage legalization in Taiwan, its influence has gradually spread to neighboring regions, offering important examples for countries like South Korea and Japan.

Firstly, Taiwan's legalization of same-sex marriage illustrates how legal reforms can lead societal attitudes toward change. By legalizing same-sex marriage, Taiwan granted LGBTQ+ couples the same legal rights as heterosexual couples, while also prompting a shift in the public's understanding and acceptance of gender equality. This legal change not only directly improved the quality of life and social status of same-sex couples but also indirectly altered societal views on marriage, family, and gender roles. While countries like South Korea and Japan have yet to legalize same-sex marriage, Taiwan's legal transformation has already increased the public's recognition of same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights. Although these countries still face significant opposition to same-sex marriage, Taiwan's experience shows that legal reform has the power to shape public perceptions of marriage, family, and gender roles, building strong political and social support for related legislative changes.

Secondly, Taiwan's legalization of same-sex marriage has provided a significant example of family structure diversification. The reform not only changed the legal status of same-sex couples but also led to profound shifts in family dynamics. From the traditional nuclear family to non-traditional family forms—including same-sex couples, single-parent families, childless families—Taiwan's family structure has become more diverse. After the legalization of same-sex marriage, same-sex couples' families were gradually accepted as part of the societal fabric, and this trend has served as a model for other East Asian countries. While family values in East Asia remain conservative, Taiwan's example shows that the diversification of family structures is gaining wider acceptance, especially in urban areas. The younger generation's more flexible and open views on family are playing a significant role in this transformation.

In Taiwan, beyond the right to marry, the right for same-sex couples to adopt children has also seen significant legal advancements. Initially, same-sex couples faced numerous legal and societal barriers in adopting children, including the requirement to apply for adoption as individuals rather than as a couple. However, legal revisions starting in 2019 have provided more equitable opportunities. The Taiwan Family Survey of 2019 showed that the percentage of respondents supporting adoption by same-sex couples increased from 56% in 2017 to 64% in 2022, with support among the younger generation reaching as high as 73%. This shift indicates a growing societal acceptance of non-traditional family structures and the legal recognition of diverse family forms.

More importantly, the legalization of same-sex marriage in Taiwan provides significant lessons for other East Asian countries in how to confront the tension between traditional and modern values. In Taiwan, the success of legal reform was largely supported by extensive public education and cultural campaigns. Government and civil organizations worked tirelessly to raise awareness of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights, which

helped shape the public's acceptance of same-sex marriage. This process was not immediate but gradual, achieved through progressive education and open discussions, allowing same-sex marriage to gain social acceptance and fostering a transformation in cultural norms. Taiwan's proactive approach to public education and policy advocacy underscores the crucial role of societal engagement in the success of legal reforms. In particular, policy promotion and public discussion can help raise awareness and foster greater understanding of same-sex marriage and gender equality.

The success of Taiwan's same-sex marriage legalization has not only altered the legal landscape and family structures within Taiwan but has also provided significant lessons for the broader East Asian region. As social awareness of gender equality continues to deepen, other East Asian nations will inevitably face similar challenges and transformations. Taiwan's experience shows that legal reform can serve as a powerful catalyst for societal change, while education and cultural recognition are essential to fostering gender equality. Given the growing influence of Taiwan's legal reforms, it is expected that other East Asian nations will increasingly prioritize gender equality and family diversification in future social transformations, creating more inclusive and equitable societies.

7. Conclusion

This study examines the impact of same-sex marriage legalization in Taiwan, highlighting its effects on family roles, gender dynamics, and societal attitudes. The findings indicate that the legalization has not only ensured legal equality for LGBTQ+ individuals but also fostered a cultural shift towards more flexible, negotiated, and egalitarian family structures. A key feature of this transformation is the adoption of negotiated role distribution in over 85% of same-sex couples, departing from traditional gender-based role assignments typical in heterosexual marriages.

The study further reveals significant flexibility in role distribution, particularly in childcare, housework, and economic support, where responsibilities are shared based on preferences and capabilities rather than gendered expectations. As indicated in Table 5, 55% of participants report fully equal distribution in daily childcare responsibilities, highlighting a shift towards cooperative family structures, contributing to more balanced and cooperative family dynamics.

Taiwan's experience provides a replicable framework for other East Asian nations, particularly those with strong Confucian influences, where legal and cultural transformations are intertwined. The legalization has diversified family structures and shifted public attitudes towards greater acceptance of non-traditional families. While challenges remain in regions with strong Confucian values, Taiwan's approach to legal reform, public education, and cultural advocacy serves as a model for potential reforms in the region.

Ultimately, Taiwan's legalization of same-sex marriage has not only redefined family structures and gender norms but has also set a precedent for legal and cultural transformations in East Asia. By balancing legal reforms with public engagement, Taiwan demonstrates that achieving marriage equality requires both legislative action and societal acceptance, paving the way for a more inclusive future.

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